

***Serious Frolic: Essays on Australian Humour*. Ed. Fran De Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2009, 328 pp.
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There are very good reasons for reviewers to read a book's introduction with care. It is frequently the introduction that offers the clearest statement of the authorial or editorial intention and thereby helps to establish parameters by which the success (or otherwise) of a book can be assessed.

The downside for reviewers in referring too closely or too frequently to an introduction is that they risk the reader concluding that they have read the introduction and no more. With that danger in mind, I would like to discuss *Serious Frolic* with one eye fixed on the introduction. Not only because it provides a lucid overview of this collection of sixteen essays on Australian humour, but because it also points to both the achievements and shortcomings of this collection.

Firstly, editors Fran De Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick use their introduction to establish the scholarly ambitions for their book, noting that:

Authors interested in Australian humour have tended to write for a popular market, and to have links, on the one hand to journalism (such as Keith Willey and Phillip Adams) or, on the other, with the folkloric left (Bill Wannan and Ron Edwards). Historically, this has produced impressionistic accounts of Australian humour, full of wry examples, or else anthologies of jokes and comic anecdotes—notably the bush yarn—but relatively little in the way of scholarly analysis. (xv)

De Groen and Kirkpatrick then grapple briefly with the complexities that are inherent when academic modes attempt to express the 'intimate appreciation of fine shades of verbal and social inflection refracted in surprising and absurd ways' (xvi). In other words they question the very basis of their editorial work by asking whether scholarly analysis, or indeed any discursive framework, will inevitably miss the point of humour. Or, as Lillian Holt declares in a similar vein in her chapter; 'if there is any topic that is likely to elude the purview of an "expert", I would wager that it is humour, given its elusive, ethereal quality' (84). Such observations point to the considerable challenges faced by anyone who scrutinises the essence of humour, and perhaps not surprisingly Holt chooses to beg the question of exactly who might be considered 'expert' in this regard. Without attempting to answer *that* question, the editors are nonetheless correct to conclude that if cultural studies and interdisciplinarity are to mean anything in the context of contemporary scholarship, then humour is a justifiable area for academic scrutiny.

In so far as the collection as a whole might be said to incorporate any scholarly conclusions about Australian humour and comedy, it is to suggest that they have functioned in ways that are generally supportive of national narratives and social conformity. As Jessica Milner Davis declares in the context of a discussion of so-called WOG humour, 'Australian humour seems . . . to serve an aggressively normative and socialising function . . . and to underpin the egalitarian but conformist

nature of Australian society' (40). Indeed it is noticeable that in the one chapter, by John McCallum, that addresses the transgressive role of humour, of the four mini 'case-studies' presented only one (Pauline Pantsdown) is Australian. Sadly, but perhaps predictably, McCallum concludes that contemporary comedy's capacity to transgress has been reduced to momentary shock rather than genuine and sustained subversion. Or perhaps more to the point, that Australian comedians have been conditioned by the conservative modes of humour that prevail in this country to settle for the easy laughs that accompany that shock, rather than to explore the opportunities that comedy offers to genuinely test the boundaries of national discourse.

De Groen and Kirkpatrick also use their introduction to note that *Serious Frolic* 'began as—and remains—a festschrift for Ken Stewart, one of the great scholars of Australian literary humour' (xxvii). This purpose of a collection dedicated to Ken Stewart explains two characteristics of the book. Firstly, as the editors note, it is 'literary humour' that has been the focus of Stewart's considerable scholarship and this emphasis on literature is reflected in *Serious Frolic*. The editors further prepare readers for the focus on written rather than performed humour by declaring that the collection functions under the 'the inclusive and "fluid" rubric of "humour" rather than "comedy"' (xvii)—with the generous use of inverted commas indicating the definitional problems surrounding these terms, another problem that De Groen and Kirkpatrick discuss briefly in the Introduction.

The focus on literary humour is also of a type that can be described—as indeed the editors do—as 'classic' Australian humour. With essays by Stewart himself on Henry Lawson, Philip Butters on C. J. Dennis, Peter Kirkpatrick on Lennie Lower, Elizabeth Webby on nineteenth-century parody, and Michael Sharkey on pre-1950s fiction, *Serious Frolic* leans towards a nostalgic contemplation of the forms of humour grounded in nation-building and enshrined by the *Bulletin*.

This foregrounding of the literary is certainly not a problem in terms of the quality of the essays that are included, but it does inevitably diminish the focus on other modes that may be more resonant for contemporary Australians. It is, for example, certainly arguable that in so far as Australia has dominant humorous modes they are found in the performative and visual rather than the literary. The realm of performance is taken up in the book's concluding section with papers by Ann Pender (on Barry Humphries), John McCallum (on stand-up and verbal comedy), and Susan Lever (on the challenging subject of tv sitcoms), but the visual—particularly Australia's rich history of cartooning—is almost entirely absent. Indeed the Introduction seems to point to a somewhat broader scope for the book by name-checking a wider range of performance comedy and comedians (*The Mavis Bramston Show*, *Summer Heights High*, Billy Birmingham, Austen Tayshus, Umbilical Brothers, Kevin Bloody Wilson, Flacco) than is reflected in the book proper.

A further matter arising from the concept of the festschrift is that it is, of course, in the nature of such collections to include contributions from longstanding colleagues of the person being honoured. This, understandably, has the effect of producing essays by scholars of a certain age—and my apologies to any of the contributors who don't consider that they are part of *that* generation. It is, however, one of the missed opportunities of *Serious Frolic* that it does not examine the generational divides regarding what Australians find to be humorous or funny or amusing. For if, as

several essays point out, it is obvious that humour can fail to transcend nationalities, it is also apparent that it can fail to cross generations. A more complex critique and discussion of Australian humour could have been achieved, either by including papers that explored the issue of generational difference, or even more effectively by the inclusion of younger voices bringing a fresh perspective to the subject.

The Introduction is also used by the editors to address—or at least introduce—the critical issue of exactly what constitutes a national humour, or more specifically, asking if it is possible to identify unique elements of Australian humour. They sensibly point out the almost impossible task of ‘defining’ a national humour, but are also irresistibly drawn to picking away at its various manifestations, attempting to pinpoint some of the ‘relationships between comedy and cultural identity’ (xviii). This challenge of defining or describing the characteristics of Australian humour is taken up in several essays, notably those by Jessica Milner Davis, John McLaren, and editor De Groen herself, in a paper which discusses the sardonic streak in Australian soldier memoirs of the Second War. Each of these papers is thoughtful and thought-provoking, but predictably they only suggest aspects of what might be considered distinctively Australian humour, rather than find a means of encapsulating its essence. Indeed McLaren suggests that the question as to whether humour can be ‘distinctively Australian’ is ‘probably unanswerable’ (48), but nonetheless he takes his turn at running the rabbit down various burrows in order to establish the futility of the task.

Astute editors and authors will also use an introduction to defer potential criticism of their efforts. In this case De Groen and Kirkpatrick wisely choose to acknowledge the preliminary and fragmentary nature of their collection. As they note, ‘We don’t pretend to have exhausted the subject of Australian humour—far from it. Think of this, rather, as a conversational gambit, an invitation to further discussion and speculation’ (xxviii). Certainly the essays presented herein should provoke additional consideration of the things Australians find humorous, and this will in turn hopefully encourage further scholarly considerations of the way in which Australians use humour to make sense of, and express their attitude toward, their shared place in the world.

Notwithstanding this inevitable and acknowledged incompleteness, there is much to admire about this collection as a whole, and about many of the individual essays, some of which take the subject in unexpected directions—Peter Pierce on the naming of horses; Michael Sharkey’s discussion of fiction investigating the male response to marital pressure; and Virginia Blain on an obscure element of the Ern Malley hoax (although one might wonder about the presence of this final piece in a book on humour). In addition Lillian Holt provides a perceptive overview of Aboriginal humour. Holt heeds her own advice about humour’s ‘elusive, ethereal quality’, and settles for establishing the importance of humour to Indigenous Australians rather than attempting to describe the particular characteristics of Aboriginal humour. I also particularly enjoyed Michael Wilding’s personal reflection on the difficulty of writing fictional humour—an account which does much to highlight those very qualities referred to by Holt.

Finally, the editors also note that ‘*Serious Frolic* may not be funny, but it is frolicsome’ (xxvii). It is certainly the case that many of the authors have engaged with the spirit of their subject by adopting an appropriate lightness of tone. The scholarly

intent of the undertaking is in no way diminished as authors consistently manage to be serious about being funny while adopting an air of easeful and amused contemplation of their chosen topic. As a consequence *Serious Frolic* wears its scholarship lightly, and in a way which will hopefully attract an audience from beyond the academy.

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